

Administration of Joseph R. Biden, Jr., 2021

Remarks During a Tour of W.S. Jenks and Son
March 9, 2021

W.S. Jenks and Son co-owner Michael Siegel. So this is our main showroom in the store. You can see a lot of our employees up top there.

The President. Hey, everybody. How are you?

Participants. Hi!

The President. It's good to see you.

Mr. Siegel. We are DC's oldest hardware store. We've been continuously operating in this city since 1866. We've moved around a few times. We've been in this building for 7 years now. Like my father was telling you, this is actually our second Presidential visit, but our first one in this building. So welcome. We're excited to have you here today.

And we want to introduce you to Mary Ackley, from Little Wild Things. She has a separate business in our building. What they do is microgreens. And I'll turn it over to Mary because she can describe her business a lot better than I'll be able to.

The President. Fire away, Mary.

Little Wild Things Farm Founder and Chief Veggie Officer Mary Anna Ackley. [Laughter] Sure. We moved here a few years ago, and we are an urban vertical farm located right next door. We grow salad greens, microgreens, and edible flowers. Beautiful salads. We deliver them all over the greater Washington, DC, area, both to homes, and we donate locally here in the neighborhood.

The President. Now, you've been engaged in the neighborhood too. You sponsor a Little League team, don't you?

Mr. Siegel. We do. We sponsor a Little League team. We also—we run job fairs for special needs programs to get their students—to help them find employment. We've actually hired three people from those—from that job program. It's called "Project SEARCH." It's a partnership between a nonprofit and the DC government, and they do a great job training their students, who are special needs, to come and be able to work in an environment like this and be great contributors.

The President. Have you hired any of those folks?

Mr. Siegel. We've hired three.

The President. Three?

Mr. Siegel. Yes.

The President. I'll be darned.

Mr. Siegel. And Mary participated in our first job fair. We were going to do another one, but obviously, the pandemic has halted our ability to do that. But when things go back to normal, we're going to continue to do those job fairs.

The President. Tell me, what kind of—what hit you the hardest when the pandemic hit?

Mr. Siegel. Right. So the biggest challenge is what were we going to do with our staff. You know, there were so many uncertainties related to what the virus actually did. The first thing that

we did was we took all of our at-risk employees, and we sent them home, and we paid them through that entire process. That first wave of PPP loans was very helpful to allow us to do that. Obviously, that was not cost effective, but we felt like we had to do that for our employees.

You know, and we're still struggling because we did—a lot of retail business has actually increased over the course of the pandemic. I think people know there's a little bit of hardware boom.

A big portion of our business is actually Government sales and commercial sales. And, for the first 4 or 5 months, I mean, that was completely gone. And honestly, usually, it's about 60 percent of our annual revenue.

The President. Well, one of the reasons why I changed the rule for—it was 20 days—to make sure only employers that had 20 or fewer employees could qualify for PPP. And the reason for that was, 400,000 small businesses went out of business. They got in line, but they couldn't get the help.

And we found out that an awful lot of that went to big—bigger businesses that, in fact, weren't supposed to qualify for this. Because they—there used to be a thing called an "inspector general" to see where the money went. And the last administration fired the Inspector General, so a lot of money went to people who shouldn't have gotten help, and it didn't go to folks who—but you know, the significance with this new program—and we're going to continue this, by the way—it's not only—you've been—only businesses with fewer than 20 folks could apply for the last couple weeks.

But now we're going to keep the focus on it because there's a lot of minority-owned businesses, women-owned businesses are increased significantly by 20, 15—20 and 15 percent, as well as getting people who, in fact, weren't able to get in line before. And it's hard to know how to get in line.

And so I hope this is going to continue to increase, because we're also at the point where I think we're going to begin to gain control of this virus.

Mr. Siegel. Yes, I—and we appreciate your leadership on that.

One quick point I want to make is that: I said we're the oldest hardware store in DC; I also say we're the greenest hardware store in America. We have two urban farms actually in our building. We have Mary, who is in the garage there, and then we have Cultivate the City, which is an awesome rooftop garden. They exist on our rooftop. But you can't—you're not going to be able to see it from here, but if they want to give a wave.

The President. I see them.

Mr. Siegel. Yes.

Participants. Hi!

Mr. Siegel. Yes, and then we also have solar panels——

The President. Don't jump; we need you. [*Laughter*]

Mr. Siegel. And then, if I could just——

Q. Mr. President, is there a crisis at the border?

[*At this point, several reporters began speaking at once.*]

Q. Mr. President—[*inaudible*].

Q. Is there a crisis at the border, sir?

NOTE: The President spoke at 12:25 p.m. In his remarks, the President referred to Glenn A. Fine, former Principal Deputy Inspector General, Department of Defense, in his capacity as former chairman of the Federal panel Congress created to oversee the management of the \$2 trillion coronavirus stimulus package authorized by the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act. Mr. Siegel referred to his father Jerry.

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